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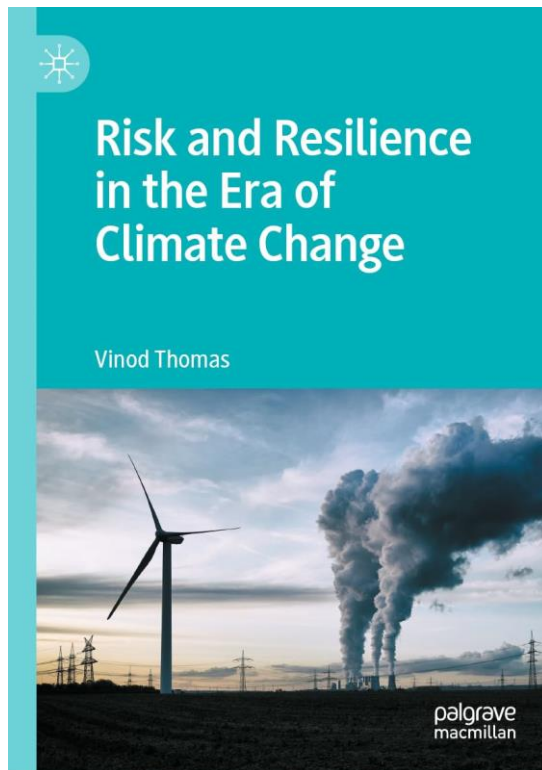
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BOOK REVIEW

Building Resilience for an Uncertain Climate Future

Preety M Bhandari*

Thomas, Vinod. 2023. *Risk and Resilience in the Era of Climate Change*. Springer Nature Singapore.



Climate change is the pre-eminent challenge of this century, and its intersection with economy, society, and nature is amplifying the baseline risks that are commonly factored into decision-making. The Sixth Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022) clearly states that around 3.3 billion to 3.6 billion people live in countries that are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with hotspots in the Arctic, Central and South America, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), South Asia, and much of Sub-Saharan Africa.

* World Resources Institute. preety.bhandari@wri.org

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This book is about securing the future of these vulnerable populations and ensuring their right to development gains, and in the broader scheme, ensuring equity and that no one is left behind. It urges the audience, in particular, policy- and decision-makers—through an excellent exposition on the need to enhance the understanding of risks in a multi-crisis world—to see the need to develop long-term resilience.

Thomas draws on his rich experience to build the framework for this construct. He uses examples, including from the recent global experience with managing COVID-19, and the Montreal Protocol and its success in limiting ozone-depleting substances, to highlight opportunities for proactive decision-making to manage risks in the face of uncertainty.

1. THE SEVEN MANTRAS TO DEAL WITH THE WICKED PROBLEM

The first part of the book delves into normative frameworks on risk and resilience, deftly providing an exposé on the differences between risk and uncertainty, short-term adaptation versus long-term resilience, disaster risk reduction vis-a-vis disaster risk management, response to recovery and building back better, and finally concluding with how resilience also shapes risk and ultimately defines the capacity to confront and manage it.

With this exposé, the second part of the book focuses on the climate catastrophe, characterizing climate change as a “super wicked problem”. Lazarus (2009) has posited it as a problem that “defies resolution because of the enormous interdependencies, uncertainties, circularities, and conflicting stakeholders implicated by any effort to develop a solution”, building on the original exposition on wicked problems.

However, Thomas has very sanguinely provided a way forward to confront this problem, with a eight-part solution for effective global economic policy-making with a clear interface between economic policy-making and climate and disaster management to manage climate and disasters:

1. stress testing for resilience capabilities in the context of rising and compounding risks;
2. moving from coping to being prepared to prevent disasters;
3. prompting growth economists to pay attention to risk and resilience and de-emphasize growth in this context;
4. connecting and communicating the linkages between disasters and the urgent need to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions;

5. ensuring people's well-being, moving away from static coverage of an event to an elaboration of the causality for a wider and better public understanding of the root cause, enabling an action agenda;
6. placing a premium on innovation and risk-taking to mobilize the transition to a low carbon economy, with a special role for the private sector to unleash such a transition
7. ensuring that short-term solutions do not undermine the need for urgent action on climate;
8. inserting circuit breakers such that the proclivity towards climate-negative responses do not take hold in the wake of a catastrophe.

At first glance, these may appear to be straightforward home truths, but their collective implementation is critical to avoid what would ultimately be the catastrophic impacts of climate change on people, societies, economies, and ecosystems.

2. BREAKING THE CIRCUIT TO LAUNCH A VIRTUOUS CYCLE OF ACTION

It is with remarkable simplicity that the author has broken down the complicated concepts of risk and resilience. One such illustration, drawn from the literature, is a comparison of an oak tree with a reed—the latter is adaptive to terrible storms and able to withstand them without breaking, while an oak can also survive a storm but may eventually break—underscoring the importance of the capacity to adjust and adapt for resilience. Some of the hard-hitting climate causalities that have been explained in easy-to-understand terms are the heating of the cities in the Indian peninsula in 2021 due to glacial melting and the extreme cold in Texas in 2022 because of a gap in the Arctic winds caused by the warming of the Arctic peninsula. The causalities are explored not only in terms of multiple types of impacts but also across sectors, such as the increase in the incidence of pathogenic diseases linked to the destruction of nature caused by warming. Such nuggets are found across different chapters, making for an interesting and accessible read.

More importantly, the book brings home the crying need for correcting the course of development and economics, defying the logic and preoccupation with growth as embodied in GDPs and shifting to the integration of negative externalities, risks, and spillovers in measures of growth. The false dichotomy between growth and environmental action, the choice of discount rates in making policy choices, and such traditional analytical frameworks and tools are also clearly debunked by the author.

Ultimately, system transformation and transformative change calls for a paradigm shift in how traditional economics and tools need to change to incorporate and price new and compounding risks, alter metrics to facilitate long-term decision-making, and unleash a more sustained pathway to growth and development that makes economies and societies resilient and transformation-ready. Further, the author emphasizes the role of communications and engagement with people and societies to promote understanding and support demands for a transformation in policy, technology, and action. This is the essence of what the author hopes to encourage and accomplish with this publication.

3. THE WHAT AND THE HOW OF DECISION-MAKING

The author has established what needs to change to address risk and embed resilience in the era of climate emergency. The multi-layered assessment is extremely helpful in understanding why these changes are needed. The next frontier is how to quickly engender changes in decision-making. Climate negotiations are in a quagmire in the face of multiple crisis and adverse geopolitics, and the perils of not achieving the global goal of the Paris Agreement—to limit temperature increase to 2 degrees, with best efforts to limit it to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels—are looming. With limited scope for revolutionary changes at the international policy- and decision-making levels, the moot question is how do countries, governments, the private sector, and citizens take action to safeguard their development aspirations and be resilient to climate risks. Is there a lesson to learn from early movers—highly vulnerable small economies willing to tackle the existential challenge head on—like Bhutan, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, and small island states in the Pacific?

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